

# Using Student Opinions Regarding Traditional Vs. Writing Across The Curriculum Teaching Techniques: A Qualitative Pilot Study

Vicki Todd, (Email: [Vicki.Todd@quinnipiac.edu](mailto:Vicki.Todd@quinnipiac.edu)), Quinnipiac University  
Jerry C. Hudson, (Email: [jerry.hudson@ttu.edu](mailto:jerry.hudson@ttu.edu)), Texas Tech University

## ABSTRACT

*The focus groups of students representing a variety of majors, reported that assigning WTL exercises, WID papers, and guided-focus journals was indeed useful in helping them to learn the subject matter more comprehensively than the traditional method of lecturing and test taking. Students tended to report that they learned the information more in depth and could apply the information in their respective majors compared to only memorizing facts and terms.*

The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement celebrated its 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary throughout higher education institutions in the United States in 2005 (Leydens & Santi, 2006). A key objective of the WAC movement is for instruction to move away from the traditional lecture/memorize/regurgitate-facts-on-an-exam teaching model toward having students write to learn (WTL) course concepts and write in the discipline (WID) with a focus on learning discipline-specific notions and writing formats (McLeod & Maimon, 2000). The ongoing success of the WAC movement suggests that instructors tend to utilize writing assignments as a tool for encouraging students to become involved in active learning, problem solving, and higher-level critical thinking skills while participating in student-centered instruction activities.

Several researchers have sung the praises of WAC, WTL, and WID practices. For example, Bernstein and Johnson (2004) report that “when writing is used as a strategy for learning some subject matter, these higher order thinking skills are activated and used, and this can lead to information that is more deeply learned and made one’s own” (p. 62). These researchers also state that writing helps students “find their voices,” which makes learning more enjoyable and meaningful for them (p. 62). Ferraro (2001) concurs by writing that WID allows students to effectively examine and connect their current course knowledge with new course knowledge, thus teaching students to appreciate the learning process. Elmborg (2003) surmises that WID encourages students to more analytically and critically learn the content of their discipline, and upon graduation, enter the workforce ready to create new knowledge that will benefit their professional careers and personal endeavors. Hall (2005) agrees and states that WTL assignments should be tailored toward and help students learn and comprehend disciplinary concepts. McLeod and Maimon (2000) add that WID assignments “can expand students’ notions of audience” (p. 580). For example, professors could assign students to use the same discipline-specific information when creating one written document for a professional audience that would understand the industry’s jargon and another written document for a layman’s audience that would not understand technical information. In this way, WTL can help students more thoroughly learn discipline-engrained concepts.

Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of research literature comparing school-based WTL teaching techniques with traditional teaching techniques based on the same subject matter. These researchers reported that: (1) 75 percent of their results supported WTL techniques over traditional lecture/exam instruction on the same course material; (2) WTL assignments that asked students to reflect on their current course material knowledge, questions about course material, and their learning process were especially effective; (3)

students who struggle with writing may find longer writing assignments detrimental to their learning of course information and concepts; and (4) long-term WTL exposure may help students to more successfully self-evaluate and self-reflect when learning course concepts. Leydens and Santi (2006) delineate the difference between writing-to-communicate assignments, in which students prove the knowledge they already possess, and WTL activities, in which students can discover knowledge gaps in the course material they are learning. These researchers suggest that professors carefully integrate course learning objectives into written assignments to help students understand the purpose of the assignments and to not perceive them as busy work. They also urge instructors to use well-defined grading rubrics to assist students in meeting grading criteria, as well as helping instructors more efficiently and validly grade written work. Borchers (2001) agrees that grading rubrics can provide instructors and students with focus correction areas (FCAs) that can be tailored to meet the objectives of a specific course and topic and help students know what is expected of them when producing written assignments.

Ochsner and Fowler (2004), however, infer that the success of writing to learn and learning to write concepts has not been sufficiently proven in the past 30 years of WAC existence. These researchers surmise that other means of learning, such as speaking, listening, or reading, could enhance student learning as much or more than having students write to learn course concepts. Furthermore, these researchers suggest that WAC and WID programs are most often assessed by faculty satisfaction of those programs rather than by measuring student performance. Pollard and Easter (2006) are of the same mind and state that “assessing student improvement on some level is important because no WAC program will work if it does not result in student improvement, regardless of how satisfied faculty are with the program, or how much student improvement the faculty and writing assistants perceive” (p. 33).

Other researchers also highlight the pitfalls of WAC, WTL and WID practices. For example, Leydens and Santi (2006) remind instructors that although research has found a link between student writing and learning, both students and faculty members may struggle with the WAC process. Some students may resist writing assignments, especially when learning new writing concepts and expectations that differ from class to class and discipline to discipline. Likewise, professors who incorporate writing assignments into their teaching techniques may find the grading process onerous.

RQ: What are student assessments of WAC, WTL and WID teaching techniques and methods compared to traditional lecture-testing techniques and methods?

## **METHOD**

Because it appears that most WAC published accounts and faculty anecdotes focus largely on faculty appraisal of WAC programs, WTL and WID teaching techniques, as well as students' views of specific WAC courses or assignments, the researchers decided to add to this discourse by listening to students' points of view regarding their learning/instruction preferences between traditional lecture/exam courses and courses that employ WAC, WTL and/or WID concepts. Therefore, the researchers conducted three focus groups at a large private university during the fall 2006 semester, one consisting of 10 public relations majors; one consisting of 10 health sciences majors; and one including a mixture of student majors – two interactive digital design, two legal studies, three media production, and three sociology majors. Each student was paid \$15 to participate. The three focus groups were comprised of 21 females and 9 male students. However, because of the small number of participants, the researchers did not attempt to discern any comments based on a participant's gender.

The researchers asked several fellow professors who are active members of the university's WAC committee and the Faculty Collaborative for Excellence in Teaching and Learning committee to provide syllabi and assignments they used prior to implementing WAC concepts. They also provided syllabi that included WAC, WTL, and WID assignments and learning exercises. Faculty members provided numerous syllabi using traditional and WAC syllabi and assignment examples. Their offerings included traditional lecture/exam syllabi from a computer programming course and an introduction to public relations course, plus syllabi and assignment examples that used a combination of traditional lecture/exam and WAC elements from the same computer programming and public relations courses, a cell physiology course, a sociology/criminal justice course, and an individual in the community

course. During the focus group sessions, the researchers asked students to examine the traditional and WAC syllabi and assignments in their respective discipline and encouraged them to give their opinions and thoughts regarding the differing instruction techniques and assignments to determine which instruction methods students prefer.

The focus groups were recorded on audio tape. The tapes were transcribed and the student responses were reviewed and analyzed to determine student learning preferences.

## **RESULTS**

The good news for WAC supporters is that a large majority of the students who participated in the study seemed to agree that using WAC, WTL and WID components helped them to learn and absorb course material more thoroughly than listening to lectures, memorizing facts or definitions for an exam, and regurgitating facts on an exam. When asked their perceptions after viewing the traditional lecture/exam computer programming and public relations syllabi that determined grades based primarily on three exams, all student participants expressed that this type of course would increase their anxiety levels and could falsely reflect the amount of learning that actually occurred. They questioned whether some students responded well to these types of tests that measure student learning from reading the text chapters, listening to lectures, and then taking tests about what they've read and heard in class. A large majority of public relations participants expressed that it is better to write about course material throughout the semester, because the writing process helps students become more familiar with, learn about, and comprehend the material more effectively. In addition, they said learning course material through writing may helped them perform better on exams than if they had only read the material and studied their lecture notes. A majority of the liberal arts participants added that only listening to lectures and taking exams on text information heightens their anxiety when taking a class. They explain that the traditional lecture/exam method doesn't allow the student to prove his or her true knowledge about course material compared to writing about the information. A health sciences student agreed that a lecture/exam course with few chances to make or improve grades is overwhelming. This student affirmed that producing shorter written assignments or working on group projects allowed her to prove her knowledge in a more in-depth manner than only taking exams, thus reducing her anxiety about her course grades and performance.

Furthermore, an interactive digital design major gave an example of students choosing hands-on learning over traditional lecture/exam teaching techniques. He said that his computer programming professor offered his students a choice between a lecture/exam format and a group project, in which students would have to teach themselves how a computer program worked and how to create the program themselves. The student said that the class chose the group project. He said he learned the information more thoroughly through working with the computer program in a hands-on manner and through peer instruction than he would have by listening to lectures and taking exams on the subject. The student also said the professor admitted that the student groups brought up subjects and questions that he would not have covered in a traditional lecture course; therefore, the professor felt that he covered more in-depth information throughout the semester because of the students' involvement in the course material through hands-on and written projects.

However, a public relations student conveyed that she prefers the lecture/exam method when taking an introductory course in which she has no knowledge of the subject matter. In this type of course, listening to the professor explain new concepts through lecture techniques helps her learn the unfamiliar information. This student amended her statement by saying that in upper-level courses, group projects and WID assignments are helpful when learning discipline-specific notions after she has gained a base knowledge of course ideas in the introductory course.

The focus group participants overwhelmingly agreed that professors who assign writing projects throughout the semester, such as journals, case studies, and experiential learning assignments and exercises, greatly helped them learn the course material. The students reported that producing several written assignments throughout the semester reduced the nervousness they encounter in a traditional lecture/exam course, allowed them to process and apply the information in a more effective manner than simply memorizing the material, helped them express their knowledge of course material in a more competent manner, and enhanced their enjoyment of learning the information in a course. A public relations major held that having the opportunity to produce a variety of written

assignments in addition to taking exams allowed her to focus on the types of assignments that best showcase her learning style, while striving to improve on assignments that are not her forte. Therefore, the variety of writing assignments eased the pressure she feels when course grades are determined only by tests and to prove her knowledge of the material.

A liberal arts student added that writing about his personal experiences or opinions regarding course topics, possibly through an experiential learning encounter, allowed him to become more engaged in and think more provocatively about the class material. He added that he learns the material more completely when his professor provided feedback on his written assignments instead of only giving a grade with no comments on the assignment.

A health sciences student reported that reading chapter information, writing answers to guided questions about that information, and discussing the answers in class help her to be less distracted when reading chapters and to understand key concepts more thoroughly. However, a public relations student cautioned that writing answers to questions about text readings or about a video is a waste of her time unless the professor discusses the information during the next class period and links the discussion to real-life situations beyond text material.

A majority of the health sciences and public relations majors agreed that producing short WTL assignments and journals about specific course topics throughout the semester allowed them to write a more valuable final paper at the end of the semester. These students conveyed that they process the course material more methodically when creating WTL papers and journals, which allowed them to feel ownership of the information they learn during a semester. Because of the knowledge they gained by generating WTL papers and journal entries, they feel they can communicate the course information more effectively. Another health sciences student added that science professors can help students to learn factual information more thoroughly than when simply memorizing facts by developing creative writing assignments concerning specific course concepts. For example, a professor asked her class to design an informational brochure or newsletter about spina bifida. This student felt that because the project was entertaining to produce, she learned the subject matter more effectively without realizing she was learning it as opposed to only memorizing facts about the disease. However, other students voiced concern that if they do not perceive that they are good writers, producing written assignments will increase their anxiety more than memorizing facts for an exam.

Students did qualify some of their comments about the benefits of writing assignments. A large majority of the student participants reported that professors should provide them with specific guidelines of what they expect before the students create written assignments; professors should not make their expectations known after the papers have been evaluated and given back to the student with a grade and after-the-fact feedback. A public relations major confided that it is comforting to know what she needs to accomplish in a written assignment to make a particular grade upon receiving the assignment, especially when professors' preferences change from assignment to assignment and from class to class. A health sciences student concurred, and said that grading rubrics specifying what is required for a specific grade is useful to understanding assignment concepts and expectations. However, a media production major warned that too much structure in guidelines for written assignments can squelch his creativity and independent thought process. When professors make written assignment instructions too specific, he feels the papers become more about formatting and technicalities than learning about and expressing knowledge of course content.

A public relations major had similar sentiments regarding specific instructions for writing assignments. In subjects such as English, sociology, or psychology, this student expressed that too much structure for written assignments restricts his ability to freely and creatively write about his personal opinions or observations regarding the course material. However, he qualified his remark by stating that in fact-based subjects such as science, where there is little room for creative thought, specific instructions for research papers are helpful to understand the professor's expectations. Other public relations student participants agreed.

A liberal arts student also stipulated that specific instructions regarding discipline-specific written assignments are useful to learn what he needs to know when writing for his profession. He stated that it is helpful to learn the format and guidelines for a document in his discipline first and then write the content of the paper in the preferred discipline format.

## CONCLUSIONS

After reviewing the students' focus group comments, the researcher conclude that assigning WTL exercises, WID papers, and guided-focus journals was indeed useful in helping students to learn the subject matter more comprehensively. Students tended to report that they learned the information more in depth, as compared to only memorizing facts and terms.

Professors who incorporate or are thinking about incorporating WAC, WTL, and WID elements into their classrooms should feel confident that WAC, if used appropriately, works. As most of the students reported, writing about course concepts helped them process, become engaged in, and comprehend subject matter more efficiently than simply memorizing and regurgitating facts and definitions on an exam. These results mirror research by McLeod and Maimon (2000) who urge that professors' instruction techniques to deviate from the traditional lecture/exam teaching model toward having students write to learn course concepts and to produce written products that encompass discipline-specific criteria and writing formats.

However, instructors must also listen to students regarding their preferred learning styles. Not all students learn course material effectively by using the same approach. Some students can glowingly prove that they understand course concepts through writing a 20-page research paper due at the end of the semester. Some would rather write shorter opinion papers throughout the semester and link course content to their personal experiences and observations. Some students feel more comfortable circling the absolute "right" answer on a multiple choice test. Consequently, it is important for professors to offer students a combination of assignment and exam options throughout the semester, so they can feel comfortable when proving their newly-learned knowledge to us who will evaluate their work.

WAC works quite well for some students in some disciplines. Though, as Ochsner and Fowler (2004) and Pollard and Easter (2006) urged, professors must constantly educate themselves by confirming the opinions and progress of students as they earn their grades based on a variety of teaching techniques and assignment practices. As instructors integrate WAC into their classrooms, they must remember to assess students' progress to make sure their teaching techniques match student learning styles, and in turn achieve the goal of helping students to become higher-order critical thinkers and lifelong learners.

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**NOTES**